

Until Death Do Us Part

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Until Death Do Us Part

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Summary

Gladiator AU. Set in a future setting, where Matoi Ryuko has committed an atrocity and must fight for her life in the arena under the command of Kiryuin Satsuki.

Notes

First AU to a jumble of them. Keep your eyes peeled for more.

You were truly, and royally, fucked.

The revelation wasn't even one that was new to you. Just glaringly obvious as you tilted your torso down and to the right, managing to keep your head from having the brunt of an axe buried in it. And while you escaped the nasty blow, it left your hands swayed to the side, your knees bent awkwardly. So it came as no surprise that after blinking once you were laid out on your back. The sheer chill of the metal floor causing as much pain as your skull cracking against it.

As if that hadn't been terrible enough, the blow jarred your optical nerves. Severing the connection between brain and eye augmentation, causing the right half of your vision to flicker before going completely dark. Perfect timing as you heard the rushed steps of your opponent coming at you from your now blind-side. The intent, you were sure, to coup de grâce you before your death could be pardoned on behalf of the crowd.

"There's a blade to your left." you growled at the voice that fizzled like white noise in your ear but reached out regardless. Fingers curling against the smooth hilt of a knife you had dropped earlier.

"God, I hate-" one full-body roll to the side and you slid to your knees. Bracing the knife in your palm before pushing forward and firmly burying the entire blade to the hilt in your opponents exposed chest. "-you!"

"Well done, Ryuko." your breaths came in labored pants. Lungs scorching in your chest. Forcing you to gulp down air even when you didn't want too. *"And I know you do."*

Using the leverage of the knife being firmly lodged in bone and muscle, you rose to your feet. Placing a boot to the person's chest and yanking it free. The crowd roared at the sight of blood running freely and you took a wary step back to keep it from dripping onto your feet.

Daring a look upwards you glanced at a specific spectator box sitting at a level higher than the others. Even through the glare of the arenas fluorescent lighting you could still make out your master amidst the people conversing behind layers of impact-proof glass. Her head tilted upwards, sapphire glare angled down the length of her nose to where you stood with your

arm extended above your head. The knife white-knuckle gripped, as you basked in the afterglow of the battle.

You'd cheated death again. All to the chant of your name and the name of your master: Kiryuin Satsuki.

"Stop fidgeting." You folded your hands back against your chest. Attempting to stifle the nervous jitters in your toes whenever Satsuki dropped a tool on the metal tray beside you.

"Can't help it." She leaned to the right and out of your vision. Keeping the tip of her index finger planted firmly on your forehead so that you couldn't tilt to watch her movements. "Besides, why are *you* doing this? Isn't this something the medic could do on his own?"

"True. He could." Satsuki's tone made it obvious she was absent from the conversation. You could hear her fingertips exploring through a jumble of neuro-medical tools. The sound of metal scraping against metal making you squirm a bit out of nervous anticipation.

"Then this is fucking bullshit. You're completely aware that I could care less for you doing my repairs." Leaning back, Satsuki took your face in her latex-covered palms. Angling the tilt of your head as she watched a monitor next to her. Refusing to pay attention to your snips of disdain about how the tool in her fingers was digging into your neck.

"To date, you are the highest ranked gladiator in my care." She shimmied forward on her rolling stool, her upper body leaning forward until her face was leveled above yours. You tried to focus on anything that wasn't her. Failing miserably even after biting your own tongue to the point that you could taste a metallic tang. A few pieces of her pitch-black hair had escaped the captivity of the bun at the back of her head. Tickling at your chin and cheeks before she swiped it back with her forearm.

"I'm aware." Satsuki locked her gaze with yours and even for how brief it was you were still stunned by its intensity. Deciding that even through the glasses she was wearing, the effect remained the same.

"Then you should also be aware that you are nearing our country's champion position as well." her attention drifted from your good eye to the one that had busted during the fight. Despite the numbing solution she had injected into the area around the socket you could still feel her slipping something smooth beneath your eyelid. "I would rather not leave your repairs in anyone else's hands but my own."

"Tch. Perfectionist." There was only the slightest bit of discomfort as Satsuki dislodged the cybernetic eye from its seating. Completely severing the optical connection from your nervous system with an overly harsh tug. "Fuck! Hey! Don't punish me for shit that's true!"

You sat up, looking on as Satsuki wheeled the orb and herself to a well-lit workstation a few feet from the metal bed you had been laid out on. "You are the single greatest asset in my possession, Ryuko." She leaned over the bench. Shoulders still characteristically pulled taught, her back set straight. "Though that does not elevate you from your social standing. Do take care to remind yourself that I could have you put to death with my next breath."

"Bullshit." you spat the word. Rage bubbling up along the line of your esophagus. "I've wanted to die for years. And no matter what I've done you've fucking patched me back together like some kind of- of-" you were fuming now. Throwing yourself from the operating table so you could pace in the small area between you both. "-like a fuckin' monster!"

Satsuki's only response was to hum thoughtfully. Her elbows jittering as she worked with her back to you. Then just as suddenly as it had come on, your anger was gone. Leaving you with an overwhelming sense of defeat as you looked down at your body. Tracing the outlines of skin grafts along your thighs and tapping a few of your replacement toes against the tile. Proving along with the clicking noise that they were just additional pieces of metal fused to your body. Imitation feeling and all.

"I've won... eighty-seven battles now. Never begged for my life. Not once." you're speaking more to yourself as you mumble the words. Stretching out your left arm to observe the way the false muscle beneath the skin stretched and rattled. The pseudo-movement poorly replicated after months of heavy abuse on your part. "All because of one person."

"We are given free choice at birth. You chose to do what you did." Satsuki's words were barely audible over the sound of a dremel saw but they still hummed in your brain regardless.

A special courtesy of the communication system she had installed in your ears.

"Oh, so now you're the expert on death?" you scoff. Moving to the tray of neuro-tools and flicking idly through them. "I've killed one-hundred and twenty-five people and only one of those was because they deserved it. At least in my book."

Spinning the stool around, Satsuki faced you. Your eye cradled gently on her palm. Her features set a bit laxer than usual. "In my book as well, Ryuko."

She motioned for you to lay back down and you did. The ache in your chest from brief snippets of memories beginning to fade away as she positioned herself near your face again. "I never asked you to save me, Satsuki."

With her fingers busy reconnecting the eye, she didn't respond right away. You could tell from the slight dip in her eyebrows that she was focused completely on getting it done correctly the first time. Once she had finished re-seating it she pinned you with her gaze again. "And I never asked you to kill my mother. But we both did one another a favor, regardless."

There was a smile on her lips. Or at least you figured it was as much. Sometimes with Satsuki it wasn't about lips or cheeks. More often it was just about her eyes. Boundless, gaping holes, into a person who you knew shared many of the same struggles as you did. Different in your actions but always the same at the intent.

"I'm switching it back on now." only once she had broken the silence between you did you realize how long you'd both been in that position. The faint sound of a keystroke reached your ears and after your next blink your vision was restored. Blurry and shuddering at first, but after a few more squeezes of your eyes you could see clearly again. "Good?"

"Good." You couldn't help but smirk. Happy to know that you were done with being in that stifling little room for the day. But before you could sit up, Satsuki swayed back over you. Her lips making the briefest contact with your forehead before pulling away. Causing a frown to tug at your mouth.

“Do you still loathe me, Ryuko?” she was grinning then. Her features angled just right to suggest that she already knew the answer before it parted your lips.

“Always.” You glared at her. Despising the amount of mirth she seemed to draw from your typical response.

“Good. Then you can expect to be summoned after dinner time. Do try to be cleaned up by then.”

It had been a long time since you'd thought about freedom. Even the word itself had, at some point, lost all meaning. What was freedom when you knew you could never have it? A ball and chain, a fairy tale, non-existent. You'd gone through the emotional gauntlet of it during your younger years. When you were still bright and hopeful. Imagining a day when your name was no longer a barked command of obedience. Then as you matured, so did your ideals. Burying your previous belligerent hostility towards your situation with humbled servitude. You began to realize that some things were just what they were. Some things were nothing.

The proverbial final nail in the coffin had been the moment you stepped into the arena. Content with knowing that your freedom could still come to you in at least one form. You'd steeled your nerves, swallowed your pride, and prepared to die honorably. Though when it came, when you felt the hair breadth line between life and death- you'd fought back. Even with half your blood slicked across the floor. And that's when your gruesome saga of a life had truly begun.

"Crowd control this time, Ms. Kiryuin!" poised at Satsuki's side, you watched on as a familiar man sauntered towards her. His middle finger rising to press the aviator glasses he was always fond of back up the bridge of his nose.

"Is it not typically about preserving the stability of our overwhelming populace with these sorts of things, Mikisugi?" Satsuki answered. Her attention faux-focused on swirling the wine she had cradled in her palm. You angled your eyes at a far off point as he approached. Not wanting to garner any unwarranted spite in the company of your master.

"But of course! Though not typically in as grandiose of a way as I have planned." Mikisugi idled to a stop in front of where Satsuki was seated, but you could feel his eyes lingering on you. You held off the urge to fidget under the scrutiny but couldn't beat back the heat that rushed to your face. "This is your finest, correct? The legendary Matoi Ryuko?"

"I had her brought up specifically for your visit. It would be a shame for your event to go without the best." As if having Mikisugi's eyes on you hadn't been enough, having Satsuki's in tandem left you having to curl your hands into fists to contain your nervous habits.

"The finest indeed..." he warily approached you. Glasses slipping to the tip of his nose only for his shaggy grey hair to obscure his sight when he leaned forward. Examining your midriff closely. "Tell me, little Ms. Satsuki. How do you handle the augmentations in your fighters?"

You risked a glance at her. Noticing a scowl as it passed her face at his term of endearment before she steeled her features. Back to normal; a perfect business face. "All of my fighters have their tech set to mimic normal circumstances. Matoi, in particular, has only ever had the bare minimum settings."

"You don't say?" he questioned and you had to fight the urge to lean back when he reached a probing index finger out. Tracing it along one of the especially lengthy cyberskins they'd grafted on after a nearly fatal stomach wound. "So her arm is the same? And she managed to topple your sisters heavily augmented beasts like that?"

Satsuki set down her wine glass. Necessary with the way her hands clenched before speaking. "Nui has never played by the rules. Her fighters are, more frequently than not, set to limits that not even the gladiatorial commissioners allow. Matoi's arm is balanced completely with her real one. Neither is stronger nor weaker than the other."

Straightening back up, Mikisugi finally turned away from you and grinned wide at Satsuki. She stood from her seat, hand coming to a rest on the katana she kept at her side during business meetings. "Absolutely fantastic!" he clapped his hands together. "Though, I do have a single request before we put this deal into motion."

Satsuki rose an eyebrow, questioning without words.

"Would you so mind if I spoke to your gladiator in private? I would divulge certain aspects of the event to her that would best be left as a surprise to others." She caught your gaze after he finished his request. Gauging your willingness along with warning off your insubordination. You tilted your head ever so slightly in affirmation.

"Of course, Mikisugi. Join me in my office when you are satisfied." Satsuki said, angling her eyes on you one last time before leaving the room. Taking extra care to shut the door completely when she left. *"If he makes you uncomfortable, alert me immediately."*

You nearly smirked at the ire in her voice. *"Suppose we can add jealous to the list of words that describe you. Jealous perfectionist."*

She didn't respond, so you turned your attention back to the situation at hand. Watching on as Mikisugi swept his eyes over you again, still appraising each of the patched up wounds on your body that he could see. Which, to your loathing, was most of them due to the traditional gladiator garb Satsuki took pride in showing you off in. "Tell me, Matoi. How long have you been in the Kiryuin house?"

"Since I was a child." you responded after assessing the question as harmless. Keeping your eyes up but never focusing them solely on him.

"Were you always a slave?" he stood in front of you, forcing your eyes to meet over the top of the aviators.

"Never knew my parents. I grew up here and have served the house as best I can."

"Odd words coming from the dog that slit its own masters throat." your teeth grit on instinct even if his words held no real bite. "Easy there. Contrary to what you believe, I'm not saying it to ruffle your feathers. It's merely a fact."

You just nodded your head. Not wanting to risk punishment from Satsuki on his behalf.

"Forgive me for lying to your master, Matoi, but my intentions were not as I said to her." warning bells started to go off as you saw him reach into his pocket but he eased your concerns with a gentle motion of his other open palm. "I would like to measure your augmentations. It's not that I don't believe her but I would rather see it to know for certain. Her sister is notorious for overpowering her gladiators. I want to make sure that lying was a trait that Ragyo didn't pass onto to her more stolid offspring."

The small black device he pulled from his pocket you recognized as a basic neurometer. Something that had been used on you countless times before battles to gauge the strength index of your replacement limbs. Mikisugi unwound the wiring from it before ripping open a sterile package and attaching a capped needle to the end of it.

"Do you mind?" he asked, and for a moment you felt you had a choice before realizing that the question was double edged. You offered up your arm to him willingly, knowing that he would get what he wanted either way.

"If I feel you changing any settings to it I'll wring all the life from your body before my master can stop me." A smirk formed on his face at your words. Relieving, considering he could've had your life for the insult.

"I would never think it Matoi. Now, would you like the honors or shall I?" he uncapped the needle and offered it to you.

Taking it in your fingers you jammed it into the meaty portion of your shoulder without hesitation. Listening as he powered the neurometer on and tilted it so that you could see the numbers on the screen.

"I'm still curious, though. Which one of Nui's men was it that you won against?" both of you kept your eyes glued to the screen even as you spoke.

"It was a woman. Hakodate Omiiko." Even after the two years that had passed since your battle with her, it was still a vivid memory. You'd never be able to forget her name.

"You obviously survived but dare I ask about her augmentations?"

All you *could* remember were her augmentations. How could it ever be forgotten? Nui had taken a woman with a form that was slender and petite, and bulked it past the point of no return. Dark strings of mechanical muscle bursting through torn flesh that had been haphazardly stapled back together. One cyber eye too big for the socket, causing it to jut from her skull, incapable of movement. Yet she had hit like a freight train. Her augmentations set well over the legal limit, even for a death match.

Hakodate had been a rushed job if you'd ever seen one.

"I won. That's all that matters." Mikisugi gave you a questioning look after pulling the needle from your arm. Seemingly content with the reading.

"True. But Nui should've at least been fined for that fight on account of the astronomical readings they took beforehand and yet..." he looked up, a finger tapping at his chin in thought, "nothing ever came from it. Why do you think that was?"

You swallowed back on a retort. Hesitating between giving him any sort of fuel or contacting Satsuki. Instead you settled for doing neither. Focusing again on a random spot over his shoulder.

"You're loyal. I'll give you that." he mused, turning to leave while humming thoughtfully. "I'll be looking forward to seeing how you do in my games. Even though I shouldn't, I wish you the best of luck."

Watching as he left you nearly jumped out of your skin when you heard the distinct fizz of Satsuki's voice in your head. *"Is everything alright, Ryuko? Your heart rate spiked for a few minutes."* You took a moment to ease the tension out of your body. Suddenly aware, after her words, that you had been on edge at all.

"Yea. I'm fine. He's headed your way." without anyone to watch you in the room you began to fidget. *"I'm going to head back downstairs now."*

“There’s a guard outside of the door. Have them escort you.” nearly to the door, the sound of her voice shocked you one last time as your fingers brushed against the silver door knob. *“What was it he told you?”*

It had been a given from the start that she would ask eventually. For nineteen years you’d stayed glued to her side, making it only natural to know when she had grown suspicious of the actions of those around her. *“It was weird. He took my ASI. Talked a lot about Nui.”* hesitating a moment, you turned from the door, your mind beginning to process your discussion with Mikisugi. *“Have you even spoken with her lately?”*

“No.” a curt response, to which you gave a gracious space of time, waiting for her to continue. *“Though maybe it would be beneficial to do so.”*

“Maybe. Just... promise me you won’t let her come into the house?” you tried to keep the waver out of your tone. Even speaking with your thoughts like you had been, it was still tricky to keep emotion out of some communications.

“Of course not. Now go rest. Tomorrow looks like it will be a long day for you if Mikisugi’s plans have given any inclination.”

You nodded despite the fact she wasn’t in the room to see. Then pushed out of the door and let the guard waiting for you lead you back to your cell. Satsuki wouldn’t be disturbing your sleep for the night.

It had only taken your first few times in an event to realize that knowing anything about it beforehand just served to make you nervous. And when you were nervous, it caused your performance to suffer. The loss of your left arm had proven that. But it didn't mean that you weren't still curious. Nor that you didn't want to know what you were being thrown into. So it came as both a relief and a nuisance that Satsuki had learned to keep details hidden from you. Even when she saw you off at the entrance to the battlefield.

"Are you ready?" her fingers were busy worrying the helmet strap at your chin. Making sure, and double sure, that it was set just right to not cause you discomfort.

"I am." Reaching up, you pried her touch away. Only when her fingertips were secure in your own palms did you realize that there was the faintest of tremors vibrating through her body. When you caught her eyes there was no information for you to pick up on.

A speaker crackled to life somewhere behind you, near the entrance to the arena. The announcer's voice chiming out the five minute mark as it passed. Satsuki still had you glued to the spot. Your gazes locked on one another until she leaned away briefly, looking down the hallway, left and right, from the alcove you were situated in. Satisfied with her findings she pressed back into you, only needing to dip down slightly to avoid the visor on your helm and press her lips to yours. She wrested her hands from you, gripping you around the neck, and pushing until you felt that she might bust your teeth out with the pressure. It was short lived and sloppy but you could feel it getting her point across. The words she didn't want to say out loud, things you didn't want to hear- *don't die, don't lose, stay alive, come back.*

It left your body buzzing, like it always did. So that the retreating clack of her heels on metal flooring was completely masked by a windy roar in your ears. Leaving your mind completely devoid of previous worries, so that when a guard clapped the visor shut on your helmet it nearly startled your heart to a stop.

He pressed a blade in to your right hand, and helped you shimmy your left into a bulky tower shield, before removing the tethers from your ankles and opening the entrance. You took a steadying breath. Testing the weight of the items you had been burdened with. Then stepped out through the gate and into the blinding light of the arena.

Hakodate had been a fearsome opponent. One you would never be able to forget, one that still haunted your dreams some nights. The long and especially dark evenings where you would bolt upright, your right hand clutching desperately at the juncture between your left shoulder and torso. There was nothing worse than those memories. They reminded you that metal and cybernetic fibers had easily replaced what had been lost.

So when your eyes had eventually adjusted to the artificial lighting overhead, your pace to the middle of the field ground to a halt. At the entrance straight across from where you had strode in, stood five of Nui's gladiators. Hulking figures, each as grotesque and skewed as

Hakodate had been. It caused you to risk a glance back, only to find that the arena gate had already been shut tight behind you.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Most esteemed guests and those who are watching from far away tonight!” it was Mikisugi’s voice that blared through the arena, rousing the crowd to their feet as you continued the rest of the way to the center of the area. “We have an incredible match lined up for your viewing pleasure this evening!”

The rest of his introductions meant little to you. It was more important to size up your opponents and the weapons they had been outfitted with. Two with tower shields and swords, the same as you, one with a spear, one with a trident and net, and one with only throwing javelins. It would’ve been favorable had your opponents not been literal goliaths.

“And of course, your champion, the undefeated Matoi Ryuko!” raising your sword, you angled the tip towards the pulpit. Taking the opportunity to churn the roar of the crowd and find the silhouette of your master. Becoming bitter when you discerned hers alongside another with twin pigtails. “Ready yourselves gladiators!”

The time had come and you prepared yourself. Shield raised and braced. Sword rested atop it. Breath kept steady despite the labored beating of your heart.

“Begin!”

You didn’t truly know what frightened you more in that moment. The thundering footfalls of your opponents as they charged towards you, or the faintest click under your foot as you took your first step. The sound wasn’t unfamiliar to you, just as the games weren’t, but it still served to rattle your nerves knowing you had put your entire weight on a pressure plate. Something that, in the past, had managed to sever a few of your toes from your foot.

It was a matter then of just not moving. Or at least, not until the right time. Which you figured had been about the moment one of the shield gladiators neared you. Their body poised over the faintest slit in the metallic floor. So that when you leaned off the plate, jumping well away from the area, the resulting sweep of a razor keen blade severed their shield arm from their body.

The act barely phased them and they continued to barrel forward absent their limb. Mouth gaping and spittle dripping from their chin. You pivoted, retreating until you felt another click beneath you. Rolling forward you threw your body out of harm's way as a metal spike ejected from the ground, burying itself up and through your opponent's chest before lodging itself in their skull. The crowd went fever pitch at the sight of the first death and you let their cheers fuel the burning pride in your heart.

Coming out of your roll you skidded to a halt, turning with your shield raised and by chance deflecting a javelin that had been hurled from the other side of the arena. The blow rocked you and it came as a surprise that the projectile hadn't busted through the bulwark entirely. But it was the least of your concerns as the other shieldman lunged at you, their sword arcing down from above.

If not for the experience of years of combat you may have made the same mistake you had two years ago and braced your shield against the blow. The exact action that had caused you to lose your arm to Hakodate. Instead, you sidestepped, letting them bury their weapon into the ground. Giving you just enough time to strike down with your own sword. The subsequent swing, driven by your adrenaline from the battle, sliced cleanly through the vertebrae and muscle of their neck. Removing head from body.

"Two down, three to go. Keep your mind grounded, Ryuko." Satsuki's voice distracted you momentarily and the spearman lunged for you. Clipping you in the side as you bowed your body out of the way.

"Shut the hell up!" you shouted. Throwing yourself into a sideways roll to avoid the net that had been thrown at you. *"I don't need your help!"*

Dodging another spear jab, you caught the offending weapon between your shield and body. A quick twist and it jerked from the spearman's hands. Without a thought you took in a deep breath mid-spin and hurled your sword. Watching as it buried itself up to the hilt in the trident-wielder's chest. By the way they crumpled to the floor you knew you'd bisected whatever had kept the blood pumping through their body.

Another half-turn and you'd gripped the spear fully in your open hand. Only needing to take a single galloped-step to gain the momentum necessary to hurl it at the defenseless spearman. It had been a trick shot, something you didn't expect to work, but the spear had been true to its target. Sliding effortlessly through their eye socket and out the back of their skull.

You grinned. The tables had been completely turned in a matter of seconds. It seemed hard to believe that Nui's men had proved so easily defeated. A testament to your years of fighting and experience with hopeless situations. But as you turned to face your final opponent, heart swelling with thoughts of victory, you left your shield down just a bit too much. Flared far too open. So that a javelin that had been midflight, effortlessly pierced your guard and slid into the middle of your chest.

Even with every trauma you'd endured, it never prepared you for the searing pain of being wounded grievously. You'd had shrapnel lodged throughout your body before. Even had thick hunks of metal tear into your guts. But the feeling of that javelin in your chest had taken the cake for most excruciating and it pissed you off to no end.

So you ignored it in favor of killing the fuck that had done it. First by sliding the offending object inch, by painstaking inch, from your body. Then taking it in your fist, feeling your fingers slip on the blood coating its length, you threw it with every last bit of strength in your body. Reveling in the way it soared forty yards before burying itself in the last of Nui's gladiators.

Only when you saw them give under the javelin did you allow yourself to slip to your knees. Grey blotches clouding your eyesight as you looked down. Your free hand coming up to clutch at the hole in your chest. Marveling at the way crimson seemed to flow from it like water out of a punctured bag.

"Don't move, Ryuko! I'll be there soon!" You laughed. Or at least attempted to. The first gasp you took left you struggling for air. Sputtering up blood as you realized that one of your lungs had been punctured and filled.

"Please..." you continued to chortle. Blood streaming down your chin. *"Please don't worry about me, Sats."*

And before you could stop yourself, your body gave under the strain. Limbs grown too heavy from exertion and blood loss. The last thing you saw before darkness took you was the metal floor and you wondered when they'd decided to paint it red.

Death had constantly been a mystery. For as many times as it had slipped through your fingers, you'd never been able to pinpoint anything tangible beyond a blackness. A dimness in your perception of time. Where one moment your eyes were closed and then the next they were open. Thrust again into the world of the living.

So it came as both a twinge of regret and an overwhelming sense of relief that it wasn't the darkness that greeted you. Nor the light of wakefulness. But that of a dream. Though more specifically, it was a nightmare. One you were no stranger too. The only one that truly made you ill upon waking.

It would figure that the stories about living your life again before death were true. The scene always began the same. Your eyes, the traitorous deviants they had always been, spying an event that would send your life spiraling into chaos years later.

Why Satsuki's door hadn't been shut tight that night was a question you'd never been able to find the courage to ask her. Not because you weren't curious but because you knew that for her, and for her well being, it was best left never talked about. You were young, and curious, and those two traits led you to peer through that crack and witness the untainted being sullied- by her own mother at that.

You'd made to leave- *wanted* to leave- but Satsuki's eyes had caught yours in the dim light and despite the atrocities taking place you couldn't for the life of you look away. There was no pain in those sapphire depths. No panic or distress. Just a tranquility that you'd come to know later was what death looked like.

So many things made sense after that night.

One in particular being Satsuki's health. Which you had once thought was a mystery of her genetics. The physical weakness just a sad circumstance of the body she had been born into. But as you were entrusted into her service more frequently, hardly a circumstance you were certain, you began to realize it was no fault of her own. Ragyo insisted her be fed less than even what you were given at meals. The grim realization coming to you in the middle of the night that she was doing it on purpose. Keeping the beast weak so that it could be bent and

formed and used. The thought left you emptying your stomach contents until the sun rose the next morning.

So you began to play a little against the rules. Scavenging away portions of your meals throughout the day to give to Satsuki at quiet intervals. Making sure that no one knew besides the two of you. And you were happier knowing that she grew hardier. Cheeks filled with a colour you hadn't seen before and body quickly turned to that with a powerful finesse.

But there in the guilt laid with you. You couldn't feel remorse for having fed the person you'd grown desperately fond of. Satsuki had come to accept you as more than a slave. The secret between you strengthening the bond where it otherwise would've been flimsy. Though the fact still remained. You'd fanned the fire where her mother had been attempting to stamp out the embers.

You'd even gone so far at times as to attempt to gain Ragyo's affections in place of Satsuki, but never capable of doing so. Something you'd found out years later had been the machinations of Satsuki's own. Wanting to keep you from having to burden any amount of the abuse for her.

It hardly came as a surprise to you then, that you'd stumbled into Ragyo's chambers one night and found the bed soaked with blood. Satsuki's hands clutching desperately to a knife that you'd noticed had gone missing earlier in the day. Leaving many of the house staff bewildered at its disappearance. But fate would have it that only you would know where it went to, and what its intent had been for. So you approached Satsuki then, with all the adoration and patience of a saint, and took the knife from her hands.

There was little cleanup involved. You only made sure that Satsuki was spotless. Scrubbing away rust-colored flecks under scalding water. Then assumed your place as martyr in Ragyo's bed.

Nui stumbled across the scene at the first break of day. Heralding the authorities immediately after. Their lack of care in making sure the evidence lined up came as no surprise to you. All that mattered was that your hands had been covered in blood. The scene laid out viciously enough to see that you, a slave, had betrayed the homeliness of your master. An action punished with death. Something you had been willing to embrace wholly. If it was for Satsuki, if it was to keep her safe, you would do anything.

She had found a way to prolong your life, though. It helped that training gladiators had run in the family. A business built on the backs of people who had been condemned to death anyways. So when you were thrust into the arena, instead of strapped into a death chair, you'd expected to die regardless. But the will to live still breathed in you despite your utter desire to see everything through to the end. Your end. And Satsuki had snatched you up at the completion of the match, claiming she'd take the killer of her mother and rewire the fiend into a gladiator. Servitude to servitude. Blood for blood.

Neither of you spoke about that night ever again. At least, not in the way it actually happened. You'd gone so many years telling others you'd done the killing that you'd come to believe it yourself. You may not have wielded the blade. But you'd certainly brought the death of Kiryuin Ragyo to fruition.

"Ryuko..." Another memory. One of silk sheets and warm mornings. Dawn rays filtered through cream colored drapes. Such a contrast from battles to be held in an embrace.

"Mmnnn, let me sleep... a little longer, Sats..." You'd never felt skin like hers in your life. So unlike the calloused edges of your own. There had been times where it was all you could do to not stay awake all night to brush your hands over the regions of it.

"Open your eyes, Ryuko." she sounded desperate but you figured it was a ploy. A crafty maneuver to rouse you from slumber so she could curl up in the heated space you'd leave behind. "You need to wake up."

"Shit, Satsuki. C'mon..." you leaned forward a bit, only hesitating when you felt the inkling of pain in your limbs. "Yah make me fight all night-" a yawn interrupted your sentence and you took the opportunity to brush your lips across the nearest portion of her skin; eyes still closed, "- then expect me to wake up early?"

"Please. Ryuko." Even between you two it was abnormal for Satsuki to beg. So you squinted your eyes open, if only at her behest. Only to be greeted with the truth. The truth you could see plainly reflected in Satsuki's eyes as she leaned over you.

You were alive.

The thought didn't comfort you. In fact, looking down at your chest where the hole had been patched with cyberskin only proved to irk you past the point of furious. Nearly causing you to rip an IV that led to a blood bag from your arm. But Satsuki gripped your wrists, her fingers digging in till the point of painful.

"Ryuko stop! Calm down!" you were still struggling. Struggling against her grip, struggling against life- "Look at me!"

You did as she commanded, even in the rage-filled haze, and lapsed into a serenity unthought of as you witnessed the unbridled distress within her. The sapphire eyes brimming with pain. Ringed with dark circles from what you could only assume had been sleepless nights waiting for you to come back to consciousness. But despite that she still held the air of control. Always the stable point who burdened harsh realities along with you. The second half to the equation that you so frequently forgot about, only to be reminded of it when nothing added up right.

"Why?" you choked out. Throat constricted from the tears that threatened to spill from your eyes. Wrenching out of her grip you reached up to clutch her face between your hands. "Why won't you let me die?!"

"I-" her mouth twitched down, eyes sliding to the side, and you felt your face screw up. Tears scorching lines down into your ears. "I can't. I just- just can't."

It wasn't the answer you had wanted but you knew it was the one she would give. You let your hands slip from their place so that you could hide your vision behind the cover of your palms. Grinding out the same phrase over and over between strangled sobs, "I hate you... I hate you so much..."

"I know, I know you do..." her fingers were smoothing away the tears. Lips pressing desperately against your own, uncaring in your lack of reciprocation. "I love you, Ryuko."

"You're so fucking selfish!" you shook your head, attempting to shake her words off. "Selfish, jealous, perfectionist!"

The moment passed in a haze as she let you cry out every last bit of your feelings. Capturing every seething retort with her lips and tongue and fingertips until you were empty. Soothed back into a faint feeling of contentment by the only means that could do so. And when you removed your hands from your face she was still there. Pressing a kiss to each eyelid before kissing you on the mouth again. One you returned in full.

“Better?” she asked. Worry still crinkling the space between her brows. You offered up a weak smile in hopes that it would soothe her concerns.

“Better.” you cupped her face, leaning up despite the subtle stabbing pain in your chest to kiss the tip of her nose. After you relaxed back into the pillow under your head you glanced up at the blood bag before looking back at her. “How much of me is metal and your blood? How much of me is left?”

“You should count yourself lucky.” she traced her eyes down your chest, to your arm, then up the length to the hanging bag. “It’s difficult enough to get synthetic blood, let alone real blood. It’s a blessing that you and I are the same blood type.”

“Or a curse, but what-fuckin’-ever at this point.” Groaning, you sloppily sat up. Helping Satsuki move from your lap so you could throw your legs over the side of the bed. Everything hurt and your muscles were fatigued. Weighty with every movement. “How long have I been out? And what the hell did you do to me this time, Kiryuin?”

Pressing fingers against the sealed wound on your chest hardly elicited any pain. It felt sorer on the inside, every time you took a breath. “A week. Surprisingly speedy recovery considering half your heart and a portion of your pulmonary artery had to be replaced.”

“Hah...” you let out a strained breath as the rage started to bubble under your skin. High blood pressure causing your new addition to throb under the anxiety.

“Relax.” her words should've set you off again, but her fingers quickly sought out a knot of tension in your neck. Relieving soreness that had set in from your days of bed rest. “You won't be able to fight for a while.”

"Hm." it took a moment of weighing her words before you landed on a suitable conversation point. "Why did I fight five people? Five of Nui's guys, at that?"

"Mikisugi had... other ideals for the outcome of the match." She slid from the bed, moving to a table at the middle of the room where she filled a glass with water from a pitcher. "He never explicitly stated it but after what you told me of his discussion with you, I have a feeling he was specifically targeting Nui's men."

"But why? He's just a politician. All they usually care about is keeping the populaces bloodlust sated." She returned with the glass. Offering it to you and only continuing when you'd gulped the whole thing down.

"There's been a lot of unrest from her antics of late. I had hoped to steer clear of the entire debacle but Mikisugi had other plans. Such that they required an enticing enough offer to draw the majority of her fighters into battle."

"You've got to be kidding me." your mood soured further at the realization Satsuki had brought you too. "I was fucking bait so he could kill off her gladiators?"

"He seemed to have become aware of Nui's obsession with you, yes." She wrested the glass from your hands before you could shatter it between them.

"What the hell then, Satsuki?! Your shitty sibling rivalry is going to get me killed one of these days!" you threw your hands up in exasperation. Smiling despite the frown that formed on Satsuki's face.

"Do refrain from saying such things." she had been moving to turn from you. Attempting to get you more water but you stopped her. Fingers wrapping around the bicep of her right arm. "Hm, what?"

"C'mere." she raised her eyebrow slightly. The slant of her lips twisting slightly upward as you dragged her back into your lap.

“You shouldn’t be doing anything strenuous for a while.” You brushed your nose against the line of her collarbone. Smirking against her skin.

“Hey now. How will we know my new addition’s working properly if we don’t test it out a little?” the playfulness in your voice betrayed your real intent. Something you knew Satsuki could tell anyways. So you leaned up and nipped at her earlobe. Letting the facade drop for a moment. Begrudgingly mumbling, “Just help me feel like a human again.”

She hummed then. Soft and endearing at first, before evolving into a low moan as she pressed you back into the mattress. Her fingers already beginning to remove the IV from your arm. “Do try to not overdo it this time, Matoi.” You chuckled fondly at her words. Gripping her by the collar of her turtle neck to pull her down.

“But of course, *master*.”

You, Harime Nui, had been truly, and royally, fucked.

It figured that your sister and her plaything of a gladiator had managed to screw you one final time. You were certain that, even though you didn’t believe in those sorts of things, they were laughing at you from the afterlife. All the way through pearly white gates, or wrought-iron shit monstrosities, you didn’t even fucking care! They’d made a fool of you- *again*!

You’d been wise to their little relationship since you were children. It was a given in the way that Satsuki constantly kept her from you. Maybe Satsuki had been afraid that you would break Ryuko? If that were the case, then you could hardly blame her. But you could still be livid at the hypocrisy in her actions.

After all, she had patched together a single person over and over and over again. Even despite her attempts to keep Ryuko’s augmentations as humanlike as possible. The fact still remained

that Satsuki's struggles had been in vain. No matter what you did, once a person went into the meat-grinder, they could never be put back together the same way.

Humpty-dumpty or whatever ancient shit saying had been.

So there you had been. Witness to their undoing. Though your hands had hardly been clean of the entire situation to begin with. You'd hoped that scaring Satsuki with a reminder of the agreement you had signed as children would send her scampering for a loophole. Just a little something to jog her memory of the whirlwind of legal fuss that had occurred after your mother's death.

There had been a vague line in one of the many pages. Something you'd decided to highlight and sticky note for a later date. A sentence about sharing the estate fifty/fifty, gladiators and all. Satsuki had paid off your portion of the mansion years ago and had allowed you to take more than your fair share of the gladiators with you. Well, all but one. The only one that was left from the old agreement.

So when Mikisugi had offed almost all of your gladiators during his piss poor of an excuse for entertainment, you'd dug the information back up. Hoping to hook your sister in with it; line and sinker. Broken and battered at her loss of Ryuko she would be easily swayed. Convinced to join you, silver tongued and all. Quite the asset when you figured that, even if she did decide to take Ryuko's life, you could always reanimate her with augmentations. She had proven to not only be quite the sight to behold but an incredible fighter. Another indispensable asset.

But it sort of figured that Satsuki would end up jumping the gun on the situation. Much the same fashion as when she had taken your dearest mother's life. Another fact you'd gotten wise too. Even when it was Ryuko you'd found that morning covered in Ragyo's blood. Satsuki nowhere in sight. It just hadn't added up. And the police had been as worthless then as they had been years later when they determined the newest Kiryuin tragedy as a murder/suicide.

You'd almost taken the lead detective and thrown him out the nearest window at their conclusion.

Yes, the scene had looked as much. Satsuki's neck snapped and Ryuko's brains splattered across the bed sheets from a concentrated blast from a concussive gun. After all, slaves often hated their masters and Ryuko had been forced through the games for almost six years. Certainly enough to snap the psyche of a regular person let alone someone with such low social standing. It just made sense.

Except to you. You knew something wasn't right the instant you'd laid eyes on them. Far too close on the bed. Bodies too relaxed for what a murder entailed. They had been right about the progression of the events. Ryuko had taken Satsuki's life, that was for certain, and then taken her own. But Satsuki had been far from unwilling. You even figure that she had found this way most beneficial. With her neck snapped you'd never be able to salvage her neurologically. Especially not with the rot that had set in from the days it had taken for the house staff to find them. Then Ryuko had just so managed to find a weapon. One she hadn't even considered to use on Satsuki. Using it to completely mangle the only thing you couldn't recreate from fake tissue and circuits.

They'd gone the way of true lovers. And while it simultaneously sickened and filled you with rage, there was some resolution. You'd at least, finally, been able to pay Satsuki back for taking your mother's life. A blow that had crippled you for so long. One you had never been able to orchestrate a reprieve for until Mikisugi had paved the way for it.

No. You, Harime Nui, when it mattered the most, had managed to come out on top.

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